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Bitter Herbs and Dark, Salty Pools

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

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Maundy Thursday CPC 4/12/01

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Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin word for 'commandment,' as in the words of Jesus, a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you. A new way of life, a new ethic, a new orientation to human relationships. It doesn't take long in life to realize that most human relationships are not characterized by love. As children growing up, many are exposed to exploitative parental figures. As adolescents trying to figure it all out, many are exposed to peer pressures that demand conformity in dress or behavior. As students in college, many are exposed to arbitrary grading systems that pronounce judgments on personal value. As young adults entering marriage or career, many are exposed to expectations that were neither negotiated nor understood. Throughout our lives, we have found ways to protect, hide, become invisible, and carry forth dreams of affirmation and love in secret.

On the Thursday of the first Holy Week, Jesus sits at table with his long-term disciples and summarizes his teaching over the five chapters that comprise John 13-17. Held upstairs in some home, this is what will become known as the 'Upper Room Discourse,' and Jesus begins his sharing time with his friends by washing their feet, predicting his betrayal, and predicting Peter's denial, finding some time in all of this to say what is arguably the most important instruction in the New Testament, that those who are in Christ should love one another in a new way.

The new way, of course, is His way. We all have our ideas how to go about loving one another, just as we all have our ideas how the Bible should fit into our way of thinking. But that's not how it works in the Kingdom of God. In the kingdom Jesus inaugurated, we conform ourselves to what the Bible says, not the other way around. And we conform ourselves to the way Jesus defines love, not the way we want. And His way is most clearly expressed in the cross which we celebrate in Holy Communion, as we will again do this evening,

As a congregation, we are indebted this evening to my wife, the Rev. Dr. Katherine McIntosh-Smith, for bringing to our attention and purchasing for our use the incredible anthem the Chancel Choir sang a few minutes ago, 'In Remembrance of You,' by Christopher Willcock.

In the Hebrew Old Testament, there was one special type of prayer in which God is thanked and praised for all His mighty acts. The great moments of God's intervention in the lives of the people are recounted in such a prayer - recited, recounted, and remembered. But the Hebrew understanding wasn't just that they were remembered, in the sense of being brought to thought, but remembered in the sense that these God-interventions *were brought back to life*, that in the retelling, the events are alive and present again, here and now.

We seek to continue that tradition in the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving in our more formal liturgy on many of the occasions at which we celebrate Holy Communion. And we always continue the tradition whenever we repeat the 'words of institution,' the familiar phrases used by a pastor in the context of breaking bread and pouring wine, the words used in the Scripture reading for this evening.

As *we* remember Jesus at His Last Supper with His friends, we (like the Hebrews of the Old Testament) also call Him to live in the present among us, through the Holy Spirit. As we take bread and wine into our hands, we take the body and blood of Christ into our hearts. As the anthem says, 'In remembrance of you, we take the bread of Easter in our hands, this bread we do consume. It does no longer taste of bitter herbs, nor of unleavened bread. It is the bread promised us where we shall be set free.'

Bitter herbs and unleavened bread are references to the haste with which the people of God left Egypt. The grabbed what they could, they left without waiting for the leaven to rise, carrying only the dough and the kneading-troughs with them, to bake and eat as they wandered. The Hebrews remembered these events in their prayers, and in the remembering, relived the moments, making them alive. And we do the same - when I raise and break this simple bread, I am doing it on *our* behalf, as we recall the words Jesus used, that 'this bread is my body,' and the words become to us words of today. For when the Hebrews set out from Egypt, they left because Yahweh God had come to them in the person of Moses, and had shown them (in highly practical ways) that He, God, was really present, and could be trusted. So they followed Moses and left in haste, trusting in a land of promise.

Jesus celebrated the Passover with His friends and transformed that event into what we celebrate tonight. We have no need to recreate bitter herbs or unleavened bread to make alive the memory of leaving Egypt bound for the Promised Land *because in Jesus we have arrived*. The Last Supper isn't really the last one after all, for we recount and recite and remember it often, and in the moments of our celebration, we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the moment of God's intervention isn't just a memory of the past, but a powerful present reality. We have been freed from the bondage of Egypt, freed from the bondage of wandering, freed from the bondage of death, freed from the bondage to sin, and freed to love one another *in just the same way* Jesus loved us.

The second verse of the anthem says, 'In remembrance of you, we take the wine of Easter at our feast, this wine do we hold dear. It does no longer taste of bitter springs, or of dark salty pools. It is the wine of the land promised us, where we shall be made whole.'

As Moses led the people into the desert, away from the lush greenery of cultivated Egypt, they came to the point where they ran out of water. When they found water to drink, it was discovered to be bitter. The people complained. God told Moses to throw into the dark, salty pool, a stick of wood, whereupon the water became sweet. As would happen many times over and over again in their forty years of wandering, God would provide. The people would lose faith and rebel. The yo-yo would continue and it would be repeated in their prayers so that they would not forget God's faithfulness.

But we do not live in that time any more, we live now in the time of the Promised Land, a time when and where we are made whole. Moses was used by God to demonstrate God's credentials to show the Hebrews that God could be trusted, that they could follow with hope, even if they failed to believe time and time again. *We* have it so much better, for God came Himself to demonstrate God's credentials to show us that God could be trusted, and Jesus took us farther than the wilderness, He took us all the way to the Promised Land, and will take us with Him forever.

And because we have the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, we have the capacity not to fail over and over again. Because we have the Holy Spirit within us, we have the ability to have intimacy with God in a way that is exponentially different from our Old Testament cousins. That's the key difference. Both the Old Testament saints and those of us in the New Covenant seek to recite, recount and remember God's interventions in our history; we both have stories to tell of God's greatness, His sweetness, His coming to us to comfort, to protect, to guide, to heal. Both groups have places where we are not free, where are broken and incomplete. But we look at history from this side of the cross,

from this side of Easter, and from this side of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit takes the concept of the Promised Land from real estate to *heart* estate.

The Old Testament saints to whom Moses spoke, looked forward to freedom from physical slavery, and waited for the coming of the Messiah. Their faith was future-directed. We have it better. We look backwards to the cross and to Easter, and sing 'in remembrance of you,' but we also have a future for which to wait. For us, the kingdom of God is at hand - it is now. And it is future. Through the Holy Spirit, we have much of the power of the future present now, and yet we also look to a complete consummation when Jesus returns a second time.

When I also say, 'this is my blood, shed for you,' again I am speaking on our behalf, pointing to the event at the Last Supper, and also making that event alive today. Not making it alive because I want it to be alive, not willing it into being with my human creative potential, but coming alongside it, acting as a narrator to what the Spirit is bringing to pass. We gather together to re-tell the story and to re-remember that it is a true story that lives powerfully in the now. Part of the reason we repeat the story is that we were told to do so, but the larger reason is that in the re-telling of the 'this is my bread' and 'this is my blood' we are claiming a personal whole-ness that we, as a church and as a collection of individuals, desperately long to inhabit. To be really free we know, deep within, we must also be whole.

The chorus of the anthem tells us that 'in remembrance of you, from exile we return, in remembrance of you, we walk upon the sea.' Yet, none of us in either testament, in either old or new covenant, believe we have the power to return from exile on our own, or to walk upon the sea on our own. Because of rebellion, the Hebrews spent some time by the waters of Babylon, hoping to return from exile. But as they waited for redemption, they focused on returning to their real estate - they defined success as a return to the Promised *Land*. And they *almost always* missed the real point, that God does not desire a burnt offering but the sacrifice of a contrite heart. It's not about what you believe, it's about in whom you believe.

Peter shivered as he looked out at the black choppy waves around the fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. The breeze was cool and the clouds sweeping across the moon made for uneven patterns of light and darkness upon the water. Suddenly there was a clearing in the mist and a shape in the distance began to take form. It was Jesus, and Jesus was smiling at him, and Jesus was speaking to him. He was being invited to step out of the boat, an impossible, ridiculous, crazy idea, but despite rubbing his eyes and rechecking to see if he was seeing things, Jesus remained there, smiling, gesturing for him to step out.

Under the leadership of Moses, those who fled Egypt walked across dry land while a sea was held at bay to either side. Under the leadership of Jesus, God incarnate, there is no dry land, and we are asked to step *onto* the sea. Out of the boat. Onto the sea. In remembrance of Jesus, we speak words of institution together, we recite and recount and re-narrate a true story that is made alive by a living God who stands within us by the Holy Spirit of Pentecost. And if we remember to remember rightly, and focus not on ourselves or our land or our homes or our children or our marriages or our futures, but on Jesus, we will not sink into the water but walk upon it, across the darkest seas of our lives, ones that will not be parted for us but ones that we can walk through and over, for in remembrance of You, we will keep our eyes on You, and You will always be with us.

***This* is how we will love one another in a new way, by stepping *out* of our boat, *onto* the water, keeping our eyes steadfastly fixed on Jesus.**

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